

The Roundhay Almshouses.

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Almshouses have existed for over a thousand years, providing care for the poor and sick and originally attached to religious houses. Later, after the dissolution of the monasteries, (when it is believed that half the existing provision of hospitals and almshouses disappeared) the Elizabethan Poor Law was the first attempt at a national welfare policy. But by the nineteenth century private provision of almshouses seems to have been more important than public provision, and the Victorian period saw a boom in charitable activity.¹ Though the Nicholson family did not employ large numbers of servants or workers, they did recognise the need to help those too old or infirm to provide for themselves; this article relates to the Roundhay almshouses, and to one particular family living there from 1887 -1906.

In 1837 Stephen Nicholson of Roundhay Park conveyed land for the building of a school, six almshouses and master's and mistress's house. The long, thin site bordering the High Road leading to Wetherby stood in front of the church and close to the carriage drive leading to the Nicholson's residence, the Mansion, the group of buildings being designed by Thomas Taylor. Humphrey Repton had expressed an enthusiasm for the Gothic style for such buildings; 'if the Gothic character be introduced in any small building, there is none more appropriate than the schools, which of late, have been erected ... by individuals, as ornamental appendages to their parks.'² A picturesque scene is conjured up by the description of 'the ornamental barge boards, lattice windows and tall decorative chimneys [which] add to the charm of the houses and school in their leafy setting close to Taylor's spired church and within sound of the water cascading over jagged rocks from Waterloo Lake to the stream in the valley.'³

The almshouses were to be occupied by poor men or women 'of good character', either former servants of the Nicholson family, or those resident in Roundhay, Shadwell, Chapel Allerton or



The Almshouses on Wetherby Road

Potternewton for at least 3 years previous to their application, and not having received Poor Law relief in that time.

There were certain rules and regulations to be observed by almshouse residents including attendance at St John's Church twice every Sunday and keeping their houses in good repair, and there was to be no retailing of beer, cider, flour or groceries, or taking in of boarders or lodgers, or exceeding the approved number of residents. The question of breach or non-observance of the regulations brings us to the case of the Yates family, Marmaduke Yates being a former servant of the Nicholson family who was 'reduced by misfortune from better circumstances', a condition entitling applicants to preferential treatment in the allocation of an almshouse.

Marmaduke Yates was born on 3rd February 1839 in Otley, (baptised at Otley All Saints Church on 10th March 1839), the son of a farmer, (1841 census), who on the 1851 census was described as a wool comber. By the age of 23 Marmaduke was living as a lodger in Killinghall, where he was employed as a carpenter. Ten years on, Yates was still living at Killinghall, now married with two children, Emily and Francis; he was described as

a wheelwright and the household included a servant, another wheelwright. In 1865 he left his employ in Killinghall to take up a job as Joiner on the Nicholson estate, living in the Joiner's cottage (probably one of the cottages in Mansion Lane, at the time of writing being 'under offer' to Leeds City Council in its bid to dispose of this property). His employer in Killinghall later confirmed that Yates had left his employ as 'a strong healthy man'. Some seventeen or so months later, Yates suffered a grave accident, which he described thus: 'the accident was a cut in the knee with a carpenter's axe through the giving way of a rickety old work stock'.⁴

Whilst Yates was in the Infirmary Mr Nicholson gave his wife an allowance for some 7 months and allowed her to go on living in the joiner's cottage, but when it became clear that Marmaduke would not be able to return to his job, the cottage was needed for a new joiner, and she went to his parents in Otley. When Marmaduke came out of the Infirmary a few weeks later, he also went to Otley. Here the family received poor relief for some 17 months before moving back to Killinghall, where they had lived before going to Roundhay.

Correspondence dating back to May 1887 survives between the vicar of Killinghall and the vicar of Roundhay, Rev. Davis, concerning Yates's application for an almshouse. A vacancy had been advertised in the Leeds Mercury and Yates asked his vicar to write in his support. It was said Yates was a respectable man whose 4 children all went to school, his three eldest offspring being able to support themselves. He was in need of help, being unable to work regularly due to his accident at Roundhay some years earlier. The vicar of Killinghall said Yates looked old for his age and in his opinion would not be 'a long lived man'.⁵ The problem was that there was only room for Yates, his wife, and the two youngest children. Yates himself wrote 'this is a very hard question, how can I leave 2 of my children when they cannot maintain themselves and are not provided for as a parent to them this I cannot [sic] do.'⁶ However, when given just a week by the trustees to come to a decision as to whether or not to take up the offer of an almshouse, Yates and his wife decided that 'it is best to

part with the two elder children for the good of the family'.⁷ There was no place for ten year old Albert, but he was to go to an uncle near Leeds until something could be found, and Katherine (aged 8) was to be sent (with financial help from the Stephen Nicholson Trust) to the Industrial Home at Ripon.

But the 1891 census shows that Albert (now 14, and a gardener) was living with his parents and two younger sisters in the almshouse. Other residents had complained that not only were there too many people living in the almshouse, but also that the children did not wash as often as they should have done! Yates was warned by the Trustees in a letter of 28 June 1894. But the family managed to keep its place in the almshouse, and when Yates died in 1905, and his wife the following year, their address was given as Roundhay almshouses.

What happened to the rest of the family?

Ruth was aged 16 and still living in the almshouse at the time of the 1901 census. Presumably when both parents died she must have had to leave; she cannot be traced on the 1911 census so was probably married by then.

Alfred (29) was living at Ravenscar Mount with his wife, daughter and son, and sister-in-law in 1901. In 1911 he was working as a colliery carpenter and living at Methley, by which time Alva Ella, the daughter born in Roundhay, was 14.

Albert (for whom no place could be found at the time of the move from Killinghall to the almshouse, but who was there on census night in 1891, and was employed as a gardener) was a clay miner at Queensbury in 1911, aged 34, married with 2 sons, 3 daughters and a boarder.

Francis (b. c.1868) was working as a joiner in 1901 and living as a lodger at Cameron Street, Burmantofts. Ten years later he was employed as a joiner at a steel works in Lincolnshire. (His mother had been born in a Lincolnshire village - so perhaps there was some connection.)

Emily, born c. 1865, so a baby at the time of the accident, was a general domestic servant in the household of Jabez Eacott, curate

of Killinghall, in 1881. She was one of the children described as supporting themselves in her father's application for an almshouse.

Katherine (for whom, along with her brother Albert, there was no room in the almshouse) was buried in the churchyard in November 1899, aged 21.

Lucy Annie was buried in the churchyard in May 1898, aged 16.

An **Amelia Yates** is also buried at Roundhay, she died aged 9 weeks in September 1866, at the time when Yates was employed by the Nicholsons and lived in the joiner's cottage. This must have been around the time of Marmaduke's terrible accident.

Reference

¹*The Local Historian* February 2010,40/1.

²Derek Linstrum , *West Yorkshire Architects and Architecture*, p. 247.

³Linstrum, pp. 247-8.

⁴Letters from Marmaduke Yates's former employer and from Yates.

⁵Letter from the Vicar of Killinghall to the Trustees, Stephen Nicholson Trust, WYAS Leeds, RDP93/16.

⁶Letter from M.Yates, WYAS Leeds, RDP93/16.

⁷Letter from Vicar of Killinghall, WYAS Leeds, RDP93/16.